



15 years of the European Citizens' Initiative – assessment of achievements and challenges

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The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), provided for in the Lisbon Treaty and introduced into EU law in 2011, is a tool that allows EU citizens to directly influence the EU policy-making process. Despite widespread public calls for greater democratisation and transparency of the Union, as well as reforms intended to make this instrument more accessible, its potential remains largely untapped.

Characteristics and formal requirements of ECI. At the EU level, the European Citizens' Initiative allows organisers who obtain the support of one million Europeans from at least seven member states to petition the European Commission (EC) to draft a legislative proposal on a matter within the EU's competence that, in the citizens' view, necessitates a legal act. Before organisers begin collecting declarations of support from citizens, the initiative must be submitted to the Commission for assessment to determine whether the conditions for registration are met. Declarations of support for the initiative must be collected within 12 months.

The formal requirements of the ECI have generated organisational difficulties from the very beginning, limiting the use of this instrument. The response to these challenges was the reforming regulation of 2019. At that time, the digitalisation of the ECI process (including online collection of declarations of support) was made possible, and the Commission was obliged to support organisers (through, among other things, organising meetings and providing translation of initiative contents, as well as creating an online register of initiatives). Member states were also allowed to lower the minimum age of signatories (now set at 16, whereas previously it was the voting age in elections to the European Parliament, i.e., in most countries, 18). Importantly, the provisions regarding deadlines were also changed, giving organisers the possibility to choose the start date of the 12-month period for collecting declarations of support.

Overview of initiatives. According to the official ECI register, so far only 12 out of the 127 initiatives registered by EU

citizens have been successful, meaning they obtained a response from the European Commission, and only two have resulted in concrete changes to EU law.

A positive example of translating an initiative into EU law is 'Right2Water', which resulted in the adoption in December 2020 of a directive on the quality of water for human consumption, obliging member states to ensure better access to water for vulnerable and marginalised groups by 2023. The initiative 'Stop Glyphosate' led, in turn, to the adoption in 2019 of a regulation on the transparency and sustainability of the EU risk assessment in the food chain. This regulation is intended to ensure that citizens have automatic access to all studies and information submitted by industry in the risk assessment process.

The 'My Voice, My Choice' initiative, which called for the creation of a voluntary fund supporting women in obtaining an abortion in another EU country if access is not ensured in their country of residence, ended with partial success. In the response presented on February 26 this year, the Commission did not create a new fund, but it did open the way for member states to use the European Social Fund to improve access to abortion.

Several initiatives – despite gathering the requisite million declarations of support – did not reach a positive outcome. One of the high-profile media examples is the "End the Cage Age" initiative, which was supported by over 1.4 million citizens and 170 organisations. As a result, the Commission committed to presenting proposals for EU legislation on a ban on cage farming by 2023, but later withdrew this idea.

Consequently, the organisers filed a complaint against the Commission with the Court of Justice of the EU (the first hearing on this will take place in March this year). Currently, the Commission is also facing the challenge of finding an appropriate response to the “Fur Free Europe” initiative, which received over 1.5 million declarations of support. Based on the opinion of the European Food Safety Authority, the Commission is to decide by March this year whether it deems it appropriate to introduce (after an appropriate transitional period) a ban or to apply other measures to improve animal welfare.

For the vast majority of initiatives, the organisers fail to meet the formal requirements – so far, 73 initiatives have not obtained the required number of signatures or reached the appropriate thresholds. The organisers of 27 initiatives withdrew their projects. For 24 initiatives, the Commission refused registration, citing a lack of competence to adopt the legal act. This was the case, for example, with initiatives aimed at keeping the United Kingdom in the EU. The Commission also refused registration of ECIs concerning unconditional guaranteed income, guarantees of access to high-quality social care throughout life, as well as recommendations to sing the European anthem in Esperanto or to abolish corrida in Europe.

Limitations and challenges. Despite the 2019 European Citizens’ Initiative reform, organisers still find it difficult to meet the formal requirements for carrying out an initiative. For example, the requirement to collect signatures in at least seven member states does give the initiative a pan-European dimension, but it makes the process complicated, time-consuming, and costly.

Importantly, citizens’ knowledge about instruments for directly influencing the EU decision-making process remains limited. In the 2025 Eurobarometer survey, 78% of Europeans declared that they are not very familiar with them or do not know them at all. At the same time, 40% of citizens indicated that greater transparency and access to information on ways to participate in the policymaking process would encourage greater engagement.

Since the Conference on the Future of Europe proposal (which lasted from May 2021 to May 2022), the European Commission has been more broadly promoting new

methods of engaging citizens in policymaking, primarily through European citizens’ panels. The recent reforms it has initiated in the field of democratisation, such as the European Democracy Action Plan and the European Civic Engagement Strategy presented at the end of last year, are not directly addressed to challenges related to the functioning of the initiative. However, they prioritise countering disinformation and foreign influence on democratic processes in the EU and building the resilience of the societies of Member States. In the proposal for the multiannual budget for 2028–2034, there is a mention of the ‘AgoraEU’ program, which is intended to help create a space for dialogue on culture, EU values, and citizen participation. The Commission has also announced investments in supporting civic education in schools and in increasing the digital skills of Europeans.

Conclusions and perspectives. The intention when introducing the European Citizens’ Initiative at the EU level was to increase the engagement of citizens of member states in shaping EU law. However, after 15 years of operation, the initiative’s impact remains very limited. There are still many formal restrictions, and the lack of positive follow-up by the Commission or unclear responses to citizens’ proposals can lead to frustration and discourage the use of this tool. Far too many Europeans are still simply unaware of the existence of the initiative, making it impossible for it to fulfil its envisaged role.

In the face of the low success rate of initiatives, the accompanying campaign seems to be of central importance. It allows socially important topics to be brought into public debate, builds bonds between citizens of member states, and supports grassroots social movements.

The need to increase social participation is still being highlighted by EU institutions, given growing support for Eurosceptic groups. However, the significance of initiatives in the catalogue of direct democracy tools in the EU is decreasing in favour of other forms of engagement, such as citizens’ panels. The investments announced by the Commission in promoting citizen dialogue and supporting civic education and digital skills of Europeans are likely to have little effect on improving the recognition of the European Citizens’ Initiative and the level of use of this tool.